

Raising Sheep in Lehi

When I was a child, the wool industry contributed a great deal to the local economy. There were several sheep ranchers in our end of the county, including three or four in our town. The ranchers would keep the herds out on the desert west of Cedar Valley for their winter range and move them to the mountains east of Utah Valley for their summer range.

Each spring and fall they passed through our town. In the spring, usually in late April or early May, they would hold the herd at an area west of the steel bridge at the Jordan River, (which is now a housing development) where the ewes would deliver their lambs and the herd would be sheared of their wool while the lambs got strong enough to travel.

This area had several low sheds that were used when the weather was inclement. There were also several small pens that were used by the men who sheared the sheep. This area was known locally as the lambing grounds or shearing pens. It wasn't unusual for a few of the ewes to die during the birthing process and when this happened, the result was orphan lambs that would also die if they were not cared for, because a ewe would not let a stray lamb nurse, even if she had lost her lamb. These orphans were available for adoption by people who had the means to care for them.

My first experience with the lambs began shortly after we got the cow. One day when I came home from school, Grandfather told me he had a surprise for me. "Some pets," he said. He led me out to the garden lot and there under the fruit trees, in a small pen made with wire fencing, stood three lambs. They were only a day or two old and they looked quite forlorn, and I suppose they were very hungry.

When we approached the pen, they started to bleat. I guess they thought we were their mothers. When I expressed concern about their hunger, Grandfather told me we would soon remedy that. We went to the screened porch and picked up three bottles of skimmed milk that Grandmother had prepared. The bottles had a capacity of about a pint and a half and had nipples on them.

Grandfather took two bottles and gave the other one to me and we went to feed the lambs. Although newborns are supposed to know how to suck instinctively, these did not seem to know what the nipples were for.

Grandmother, who had come along to witness, suggested that I put some milk on my finger and then put it into the lamb's mouth to give it a taste of the milk. I did this and the lamb sucked on my finger, but it would not suck on the nipple. She then told me to squirt some milk into its mouth, which I did, but no avail. The lamb licked the milk off its lips but would not take the nipple.

I decided to try to trick the lamb into sucking on the nipple, so I squirted some milk on my finger and stuck it in the lamb's mouth and when it started to suck, I pushed the nipple in alongside my finger and the lamb started to get some milk. After a minute or two, I withdrew my finger and the lamb spit out the nipple and tried to suck my finger.

I again inserted my finger and the nipple into its mouth to get some milk. After a moment or two I slowly removed my finger and this time the lamb continued to suck.

Meanwhile, Grandfather was not having any better luck with his two lambs. I asked Grandmother to hold the bottle that I had, and I took one of the bottles from Grandfather and repeated the process with the second lamb. When it had retained the nipple, and started to get some milk, I handed the bottle to Grandfather and repeated the drill with the third lamb. I think the lambs learned rather quickly where their food came from, as we had no problems with the nipples on subsequent feedings.

I asked Grandfather where they would spend the night, and he said, "In the pen." I felt sorry for them because it was still quite chilly at night, and I was worried about dogs.

When we had finished our evening chores and were eating our supper, I told Grandfather that I was worried about the lambs, and reminded him that there were loose dogs in the neighborhood that could easily jump into the lambs' pen and perhaps kill them.

Grandmother agreed with my concern. Grandfather said he would put them in the granary for the night, where they would be safe, and in the morning he would fix a small pen for them in the shed where the cow and Danny were stabled.

Next morning, I finished milking and brought the milk to the house. Grandmother had the three bottles filled and was waiting for me to feed the lambs.

Grandfather had put the lambs back into their day time pen and I think they were glad to see me, and the milk bottles, because they came over to the side of the pen where I was standing.

At this time a little problem arose. The problem was—there were three lambs, three bottles of milk, and only two hands. I began by setting one bottle on the ground and held the other two over the side of the pen, thinking I could feed two and the other one would wait its turn. That didn't turn out to be correct, because all three were fighting to get a nipple and as a result, none could get much milk.

I then put the bottles on the ground and lifted one of the lambs out of the pen and held the bottle until the lamb emptied it at which time I put it back in the pen. I used the same method to feed the others.

When I carried the empty bottles back to the house I felt quite proud of myself, but Grandmother pointed out another problem. I had spent over a half an hour feeding the lambs and I was about to be late for school. She said we would talk about the problem when I came home for lunch.

She gave me a piece of toast to eat on my way to school. When I came home for lunch she had the bottles ready for the lambs and a sandwich ready for me. I told her that I didn't know they had to be fed at noon, and if I had to feed them I would not have time for lunch.

She said that was why she had made me a sandwich, and that I could use one hand to feed the lambs and the other to hold the sandwich. She also said that the lambs were babies and needed to be fed often until they were old enough to start eating grass and I would have to find the extra time to attend to this chore.

Finding the time for the morning feeding was easy. I just got up a half hour earlier. Time was no problem at the evening feeding, but the mid-day feeding was a problem. I saved a little time by lifting one lamb out of the pen and feeding the other two in the pen at the same time and then feeding the one out of the pen, and putting it back, but it wasn't enough time to sit down for lunch.

I soon got tired of getting just a sandwich for lunch, so I decided that I would have to find a way to feed all the lambs at the same time. After thinking about what I could do, I had an idea that if I could build some kind of a rack to hold the bottles, I would be able to feed them all at the same time.

We had a small supply of used lumber, and I asked Grandfather if I could use some to try out an idea I had about feeding the lambs. He gave me permission and I selected two pieces about four feet long. One was a one by six and the other a one by eight. I nailed them together to form a 'V' shaped trough and cut three slots in the narrow side to let the necks of the milk bottles come through.

At the next feeding, I inserted the necks of the bottles into the slots and carried the rack to the lambs' pen and held it over the side. After a little jostling, each lamb found a nipple and all were sucking at the same time.

After a few minutes of holding the feeding rack over the side of the pen, my arms were getting tired and I had to get in the pen so I could brace the rack against my knee, but I was elated that my idea had worked to save some time.

I had another idea. I asked Grandfather if I could use some lumber to build a stand to hold the rack. He replied, "Why don't you just fasten the rack to the apple tree that shades the milk house and that will save you some footsteps as well as some time?" I took his advice and the time saving project worked out very well.

Grandmother congratulated me, and said, "I knew you could figure out how to save some time if your lunch was at risk." She then assigned me the task of filling the bottles for the morning and evening feedings.

After two or three days of being fed at the rack fastened to the tree, caring for the lambs was just a routine chore. Before I went to milk the cow in the morning, I would fill the bottles and place them in the feeding rack. When I arrived at the shed where the lambs were stabled, I would let them out of their pen and they would follow me to the feeding rack, and I would return to the cow shed. By the time I had finished milking, they would be finished eating, and I would lead them to the pen in the orchard.

After a couple of days, they would lead me to the feeding rack, sohen I would let them out and they would, “high tail” it to the rack.

Grandmother would fill the bottles and place them in the rack for the noon feeding, and when I arrived for lunch I would let them out of the orchard pen and they would go to the rack to eat, and by the time I had finished lunch, they had finished and I would put them back in their pen.

The evening feeding was about the same as the morning one. I would fill the bottles, place them in the rack and let them out of the orchard pen and they would go the feeding rack, and by the time I had finished milking, they were usually at the cow shed waiting for me to put them into their pen.

When the lambs were a few weeks old they started to nibble on the vegetation, mostly grass and weeds, growing inside their orchard pen. Shortly thereafter, the ground was bare and Grandfather moved the pen to a new patch of vegetation. When they had eaten most of the plants in that area, Grandfather would move the pen again. By moving the pen, and changing its configuration, we were able to provide food for the lambs as well as control the weeds.

We even used them to mow the grass on the front lawns. They really thrived on their diet of milk and vegetation and after they were old enough to be weaned, their diet was augmented with alfalfa hay and rolled barley.

By the end of the summer they were almost full grown. I think they weighed about forty pounds and were, as Grandfather would say, “Fat and sassy.”

In the early fall, I think about the middle of September, I heard Grandmother ask Grandfather, “When are we going to have a leg of lamb to roast for Sunday dinner?” He replied, “When it gets cold enough at night for the meat to keep.” Although I had known from the time we got the lambs that they would be used for meat, this was the first time I realized what was in store for my ‘pets,’ as Grandfather called them.

I had never considered them to be pets, even though they followed me everywhere I went when they had the opportunity, probably because of the extra chores they brought to me. But I now realized that I had developed some affection for them and was saddened by the thoughts of

coming events. I was sure I would not be able to eat any of the roast leg of lamb. But that feeling, as well as the feeling of sadness, eventually passed.

When the first frost came, Grandfather, who had been a butcher and had owned a meat market in his earlier days, slaughtered the largest lamb.

After skinning it to remove the pelt, which would be sold to a furrier, he quartered the carcass and hung it in the screened porch to cool. The next morning, while the meat was still cold, he wrapped it in a heavy denim quilt and took it to the granary and buried it in the wheat bin. This kept the meat cool during the day, as the wheat was cool all the time after the nights got down to freezing, and in the evening he would remove the quilt from the wheat bin and hang the meat in the screened porch for the night. This procedure was repeated until the meat was consumed, which wasn't long because we had company for almost every Sunday dinner.

When we got low on meat Grandfather would repeat the process on the next lamb. I am surprised that I can remember my experiences with the lambs in such clarity, but I guess first impressions are the lasting ones.

We raised lambs in subsequent years when we had a cow to get them started, usually two or three. One year we had five, but Grandfather sold two as soon as they were weaned. I don't remember as much about the later years, but I am sure the drill was the same.

I was probably was about nine or ten.